

The Twins of Tarkiln

By TONY KELSO

The Tarkiln Building on Route 53/Summer St. has a long and proud history serving the town of Duxbury as the "twin" schoolhouses of West Duxbury. In 1871 the first schoolhouse was built, now the east wing of the building. Controversy erupted after its construction when Town Meeting of 1871 refused to accept the expenses of the new building when some taxpayers were not able "to see the necessity of a new school-house." This protest resulted



even after the town auditing committee (an ancestor to today's finance committee) approved all the bills. Finally, in 1872 the town accepted the build-

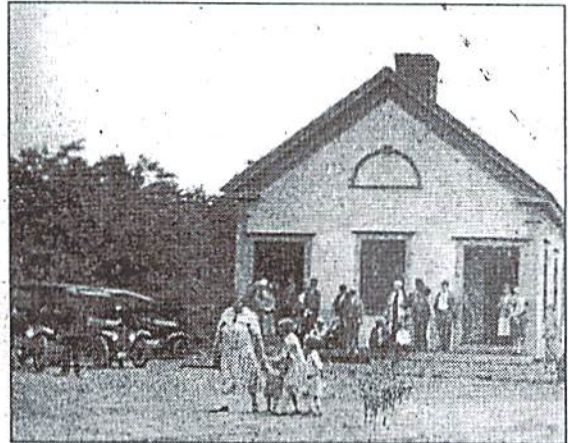
ing, which opened with 60 students. At the time, Duxbury had 13 one-room schoolhouses, with eight grades each. For the next 30 years, the oldest twin school served as a focal point for the surrounding farm families from as far west as Birch St., as far east as Tinkertown, as far north as Mayflower St., and south to Pine St.

By 1907 the buzzword in Massachusetts educational standards was "consolidation," as the state attempted to reduce one-room schoolhouses as a way to concentrate its resources for better education. Duxbury of 1907 had a year-round population of 2,028 scattered over its 25 square miles. The town still had nine schools with a total of 12 teachers teaching 279 children on a budget of \$5,200. The school committee had long stated a need for a second school at Tarkiln, to be the grammar school for West Duxbury, as a few years earlier a similar one had been built in the Duxbury village area. They got their wish in 1908 when the second twin schoolhouse was built to house grades 5-8, now the west wing of the Tarkiln building. The 1871 schoolhouse was to house grades 1-5.

With the opening of the grammar school, students for those grades were also to come from Ashdod, North Duxbury and High Street as well as the Tarkiln area. It was noted that the cranberry picking season in September-October lowered the attendance sharply in these parts of town, as many children went to help in the bogs, so the school should start its session earlier in the year. With the opening of the second twin at Tarkiln, the schoolhouses became a social and educational center for all of West Duxbury.

The expense of transportation to school first became an issue with the new Tarkiln school because the grammar school students came from too wide a distance to walk easily. Notes from parents for student absences were also now required and the superintendent frowned upon ones such as, "I kept Percy out to tend the baby while I went to sewing circle."

By 1926 Duxbury was building a new high school on Alden St. to further consolidate all the town students in grades 7-12 (now the Duxbury Free Library building). In preparation for this move, the town voted money for a wing at Tarkiln that would connect the two schoolhouses, making them "Siamese twins."



The 1908 schoolhouse at Tarkiln. Note the cars waiting to transport students home.



The twin schoolhouses at Tarkiln before they were connected in 1926. Long-time teacher Abby Baker and her class.

*Both pictures courtesy of Duxbury ...
an Album by Norman Forgit,
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This wing contained modern bathrooms, a kitchen and a basement for heating. This third addition further strengthened the Tarkiln school as a focal point for West Duxbury for all kinds of events, such as covered dish suppers. Generations of long-time West Duxbury residents began school in the Tarkiln twin schools until the last classes were held there in 1949.

In September 1949 the original phase of Alden School was completed, and for the first time all Duxbury children from kindergarten to grade 5 went to one school. The baby boom was clearly well on its way in Duxbury because the building opened to full capacity.

That boom and the town's focus on its youth and their time outside of school breathed new life into the Tarkiln building. In 1951 the Tarkiln Youth Center was voted \$1,000 by town meeting. An enthusiastic group of West Duxbury neighbors took over the building intent on making it even more of a social center. That year they had teen-age and "small fry" parties, made a ball field and had a successful team. For the local grown-ups, pot luck suppers and whist parties raised funds and made for a cozy neighborhood social center.

Through the 1950s the Tarkiln Youth and Recreation Center exemplified small town neighborliness. The neighbors held rummage and food sales as well as Christmas and Halloween parties to raise funds for the building. A summer program for West Duxbury children was successful and square dancing, rollerskating and ice skating were held in and around the Center.

In 1966 with "the times they are a changin'," Tarkiln became more of a place for Duxbury teenagers to hang out. The "Rathskellar Teens" sponsored drop-ins, dances, pizza parties after basketball games, and a juke box and television were added draws to the Center. By 1971 teenage drug use had hit Duxbury full force and a drug hot-line called Walden III and the Atlantis Rising coffeehouse, both based at the Tarkiln building, were attempts to help combat the problems. And yet as times changed at Tarkiln, the square dancing, whist parties and pot luck suppers continued to help neighbor meet neighbor.

Since the mid 1970s, the Tarkiln Community Center has settled into a place where over 400 people use the building on a weekly basis for activities that range from 4-H to AA to Irish step dancing. Jack Williams, the long-time trustee, has kept the place running nobly despite the town's ebbing ability to provide resources to keep the building up as it did in 1959 with a face-lift that made it "a proud part of the community."

The Tarkiln building that has always changed with the times is now poised on the brink of another, when the June 2004 town meeting will decide on a study of the building for renovation. Duxbury voters might "not see the necessity" of change, as they did in 1871, for the now ramshackle building. But hopefully times have changed for the Tarkiln twin schoolhouses, and they will once again become a "proud part of the community."